

Being “In Christ” Today: Paul’s Letter to the Contemporary Church in North America¹

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Abstract

As I was preparing to give a presentation on Paul and the mission of the church in North America, I remembered a little-known Pauline letter that did not make it into the New Testament canon. In fact, it was discovered and read in public for the first time just sixty years ago. The person who “discovered” and proclaimed this letter was the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. It was titled “Paul’s Letter to American Christians,” preached at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama on November 4, 1956.² After recalling and then rereading the letter, I decided that it might be valuable to ask Paul to write yet another letter for another time and purpose—though the 1956 letter is still highly relevant and I commend it. Paul complied with my request, so you have the good fortune of reading, not my words, but those of the apostle himself. His letter is about the mission of God and the church in North America.

Paul, called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and writing at the request of our mutual friend and brother,

To the church of God that happens to be in North America, to those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints, together with all those from every tribe and race and ethnicity, from minorities and refugees and immigrants around

1 This essay was originally the first of two keynote lectures at the 2016 Theology Conference on the subject “Participation in God’s Mission” at Northeastern Seminary, Rochester, New York, given on March 18, 2016. It was intended primarily not for academics, but for the general public. I am grateful to Richard Middleton and Doug Cullum for the invitation to present the lecture, to Richard for suggesting its publication, and to Christopher Zoccali and the journal for accepting it. The original presentation has been lightly edited for the present context.

2 http://kingencyclopedia.stanford.edu/encyclopedia/documentsentry/doc_pauls_letter_to_american_christians.1.html

the world and in your own backyard, documented and undocumented, who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours:

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that has been given you in Christ Jesus, for in every way you have been enriched, both spiritually in Christ and materially—though we may need to return to the latter kind of wealth in another letter. God will also strengthen you, so that you may be faithful to the end and blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is faithful; by him you were called to participate in the life of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord (that which, as I understand it, you generally call “fellowship.”)

As you know, one of my favorite ways to speak about our life together is with the short phrase “in Christ.” You may have noticed that I have already used it three or four times. That phrase will be the subject of my letter. It is what you sometimes call “spirituality”; it may surprise you that it also means “mission.” It is what one of my interpreters calls “cruciformity” (cross-shaped living) or even “cruciform missional theosis.” (I will try to interpret them and him for you later.)

But before I get too far into my letter, let me go back to those first two words: grace and peace. These are not epistolary niceties, brothers and sisters. They constitute the core of my message, the heart of God’s heart.

Grace and Peace

It is evident to me that you are very comfortable with the word grace. (Parenthetically, however, I would recommend that you take a look at the new book by John Barclay, *Paul and The Gift*, to understand the obligations associated with grace more fully.³ Or you could re-read Bonhoeffer’s classic, *The Cost of Discipleship*.)

It is far less apparent to me that you understand the word “peace”—*shalom* in Hebrew. To be sure, this word means inner peace and security. But it signifies much more. It means wholeness and harmony; right relations between us and God, within the human family, and between us and the rest of creation. “Peace” is one of those scriptural words that sums up what God is up to in the world—the mission of God, or *missio Dei*. I use it and many other words and images in my letters to convey the essence of this divine mission: reconciliation, saving justice, new creation, and so on.

But you live in a culture that does not know the way of peace. As I said to the believers in Rome, quoting Scripture (I’m really not very original):

We have already charged that all, both Jews and Greeks, are under the power of sin, as it is written: “There is no one who is righteous, not even one; there is no one who has understanding, there is no

3 John M. G. Barclay, *Paul and The Gift* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015).

one who seeks God. All have turned aside, together they have become worthless; there is no one who shows kindness, there is not even one.” “Their throats are opened graves; they use their tongues to deceive.” “The venom of vipers is under their lips.” “Their mouths are full of cursing and bitterness.” “Their feet are swift to shed blood; ruin and misery are in their paths, and the way of peace they have not known.” “There is no fear of God before their eyes.” (Rom 3:9–18)

Sadly, this is the culture and world in which I lived and in which you live, a world of verbal and physical violence—the culture of death, as one of your great church leaders, John Paul II, called it.⁴ Even more sadly, however, this culture has infiltrated the church in North America, particularly southern North America. There the Second Amendment trumps the teachings of Jesus, which I myself repeated and riffed for several churches, not least once again for the churches in Rome, the capital of the Empire—something like your Washington, DC:

Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, “Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.” No, “if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads.” Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good. (Rom 12:14–21)

If you want to be missional, start right here. What an amazing witness to Jesus this would be—a community that practices peace, both internally and externally. This is not merely pragmatic, or worse still, idealistic, advice. It is what God is up to in the world in Christ, making peace by the blood of his cross in order to reconcile all things to himself, as my letter to the Colossians says (Col 1:20). (Parenthetically, that comment should settle the dispute about authorship!) Or, as I said to the Romans, God reconciled us when we were God’s enemies (Rom 5:10). If that’s how God treats enemies, how then shall we live?

4 See Pope John Paul II, *Evangelium Vitae* (*The Gospel of Life*), an encyclical issued in 1995 and available online: http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_25031995_evangelium-vitae.html/

Allow me to quote one of my favorite theologians from your era, Miroslav Volf:

In a world of violence, the Cross, that eminently counter-cultural symbol that lives at the heart of the Christian faith, is a scandal . . . there is no genuinely Christian way around the scandal. In the final analysis, the only available options are either to reject the cross and with it the core of the Christian faith or to take up one's cross, follow the Crucified—and be scandalized ever anew by the challenge.⁵

Think of the powerful witness of the Lord's people in Nickel Mines, Pennsylvania, in 2006 when five innocent children were murdered by a gunman in their school room. Their peacefulness and forgiveness touched the world and continue to do so as the shooter's mother bears witness even today. So does the school built to replace the murder site: New Hope School. It was and is amazing, even from my current vantage point.

You are part of a culture gripped by fear. You are afraid of terrorists in other lands, in your cities, in your schools, and even in your churches. But if you learn to practice peace, then you can legitimately quote my letter to the faithful in Philippi:

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you. (Phil 4:4–9)

Again: what a witness, what evangelism this kind of peace could be. If you seek peace and pursue it, you will know the truth of another Scripture text I quote to the Roman churches: “[T]he kingdom of God is . . . righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit” (Rom 14:17, borrowed from Psalm 85:10 and Isa 32:16–18).

This does not mean you will escape danger, “for God has graciously granted

5 Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996), 26.

you the privilege not only of believing in Christ, but of suffering for him as well” (Phil 1:29), though I see precious little of that in North America right now, despite claims to the contrary. But it is clearly happening in other parts of the church elsewhere in the world, and you really do need to “weep with those who weep.” That is part of *your* mission—to feel the pain of those who are suffering because of their participation in *God’s* mission.

Back to Basics

I have gotten way ahead of myself. (No wonder your commentary writers cannot agree on how to outline one of my letters!) But now I want to get back to basics. What does it mean to be “in Christ”? Let me begin with a few fundamental points, based on rereading my letters while observing your particular situation in North America. I hear this is now called “missional hermeneutics.” We simply called it “prophecy.”

Community

First, to be in Christ is **to be in community**. I think the problem here is the modern version of the English language. When the King James Version was popular, it was better because you had the singular pronouns “thou” and “thee” and “thy” and “thine” in addition to the plural pronoun “ye.” Today all you have is various forms of “you.” Furthermore, your English verb forms don’t distinguish between singular and plural. Is “go!” directed at one person or a group? So when my letters and other Scripture passages are read, you English-readers don’t realize that most of the “you” pronouns are plural and most of the imperative verbs are plural. For example, to the Philippians I wrote:

Therefore, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed me, not only in my presence, but much more now in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure. (Phil 2:12–13; NRSV)

What I meant is this:

Therefore, my beloved brothers and sisters, just as you have always obeyed ~~me~~ [God; I did not say “me”], not only in my presence, but much more now in my absence, ~~work out~~ put into practice your own corporate salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work ~~in~~ among you, enabling all of you together both to will and to work for his good pleasure. (Phil 2:12–13)

Do you see the difference? Yes, it is important that individuals put their salvation

into practice in daily life, but the point of my letters is to form communities into more faithful communities. Together the church is a witness in the world.

This language problem is a serious spiritual matter. It reinforces Western individualism. It suggests that a person can be a “good Christian” without being part of the church. That may be partly true if you’re in prison (I speak from experience), but even there you are part of the church. You come from and return to a particular manifestation of the universal church. I did not say it, but it is true: “outside of the church there is no salvation.”

By the way, there are some solutions to your English-language problem. You could learn Spanish, which would be very missionally useful anyhow, especially in the United States, because it has plural pronouns and verbs. Or French, which might not be a bad idea anyhow in Canada. Or you could learn my language, Greek. Or you could pick up one of the American regional dialects:

it is God who is at work among **y’all / you all / you guys / youse guys / yinz / all y’all**, enabling **y’all / you all / you guys / youse guys / yinz / all y’all** both to will and to work for his good pleasure.

These two verses from Philippians, by the way, are immediately followed by three that stress the importance of communal witness:

You guys must do all things without murmuring and arguing, so that **y’all** may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, in which **you all together** shine like stars in the world. It is by **y’all’s** holding fast to (or “holding forth”) the word of life that I can boast on the day of Christ that I did not run in vain or labor in vain. (Phil 2:14–16)

There has been debate about what I meant in 2:16: holding forth the word of life, or holding fast to the word of life. This may be a legitimate question for a scholarly essay, but theologically and practically it is a false dichotomy. You would not need to hold fast unless you had first held forth. Only the reality of pushback to a public witness—that is, representing Christ outside the believing community, even if in a private setting like a home—and the corollary temptation to capitulate, makes sense of what I said. That was the situation in Philippi; the believers’ faithful witness got them into trouble, just as it had done to me.

My point is this: when we responded to the gospel and were baptized, we entered a family, a body, and it is as a family and a body, not just as individuals, that we are called to bear witness. As Lacey Warner and her colleague Stephen Chapman have said, evangelism is a “group activity” of “living out the reign of God

together” that “entails a whole range of practices, habits, dispositions, activities, and choices.”⁶

An alternative community

This claim by Warner and Chapman leads to my second point. To be in Christ is **to be an alternative community, even an alternative political community**. Your Christian communities need to be more political. Those are dangerous words in your cultural environment, so let me explain carefully.

First, let me emphasize what I do *not* mean. I do not—repeat *not*—mean that you should become more involved in local or national politics.⁷ Specifically, I do not mean that you should be trying to grab political power or looking for ways to restore Christendom’s civic muscle and influence. That was and is a really bad idea. Why? Because the central reality of our faith, the one message I preached everywhere, is Christ *crucified*—and that is the antithesis of worldly political power. Recall what I said to the Corinthian church:

[W]e proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God’s weakness is stronger than human strength. (1 Cor 1:23–25)

Let me update and expand this a bit for you:

[W]e proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to those who connect religion with political power, and foolishness to those who actually have secular status and power. But to those who are the called to bear witness to God’s way of life, the crucified Christ is the power of God and the wisdom of God. For God’s foolishness is wiser than the wisdom of those who seek to foster civil religion for the supposed good of God and country, and God’s weakness is stronger than Western military, political, and economic strength.

What I do mean by “political” is that the Christian community is an alternative way of being in the world, an alternative way of being human, an alternative way of ordering relationships, an alternative “body.” Actually, it is not only *an* alternative, it is *the* alternative—a sign of the new creation that God has inaugurated in the death and resurrection of Jesus.

6 Stephen B. Chapman and Lacey Warner, “Jonah and the Imitation of God: Rethinking Evangelism and the Old Testament,” *Journal of Theological Interpretation* 2.1 (2008): 43–69 (here 68, 59).

7 This is not to say that none of you should seek involvement in politics in this normal sense of the word (a question that would take another letter to address fully), but simply that this is not the kind of politics and political involvement I am talking about here.

I made this quite clear to the Philippian believers. Once again, however, English generally fails you; this time you *really need to learn Greek*. I wrote to the Philippians,

Live out your citizenship as God's colony [Gk. *politeuesthe*] within the Roman colony of Philippi in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that, whether I come and see you or am absent and hear about you, I will know that you are standing firm in one Spirit, striving side by side with one mind for the faith of the gospel, and are in no way intimidated by your opponents. (Phil 1:27–28a MJG)

Notice what I said here:

- The church is a colony within a colony, a city within a city. It is a “contrast society,” as some of your interpreters have called it, but it is not an isolated sect, a “holy huddle,” to borrow one of your modern idioms.
- Believers' life together must be worthy of the gospel, must reflect the gospel. This is a process of ongoing conversion, as Roman Catholics (especially) aptly say.
- Believers must stand firm and united in their proclamation of the gospel.
- They must not be intimidated by opposition.

It is no accident that I wrote these words in the Philippian letter shortly before the words I quoted earlier about being children of God, shining like stars, a light to the nations (as Isaiah put it), holding forth the word of life in a culture of death, and holding fast to it even in the face of death.

One of my favorite Christian writers, C. S. Lewis, once wrote these words:

Enemy-occupied territory—that is what this world is. Christianity is the story of how the rightful king has landed, you might say landed in disguise, and is calling us all to take part in a great campaign of sabotage.⁸

This benevolent sabotage is not aimed at the state or any other institution. It is not a Christian takeover, a religiously based coup d'état. Rather, as Kavin Rowe of Duke said in describing the gist of the Acts of the Apostles (which I heartily recommend), “New culture, yes—coup, no.”⁹ The goal is a complete conversion

8 C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001; orig. 1952]), 44. This section of the chapter is titled “The Invasion.”

9 C. Kavin Rowe, *World Upside Down: Reading Acts in the Graeco-Roman Age* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 5.

of the human imagination, as Kevin's distinguished colleague Richard Hays says in multiple places.¹⁰

The goal of the church, then, is not to take over anything but to be a foretaste of something—the new creation that has come and is coming. One of my finest interpreters, N. T. Wright, puts it this way: the church is a “microcosmos, a little world... the prototype of what [is] to come.”¹¹ It is, he rightly says, a

place of reconciliation between God and the world; a place where humans might be reconciled to one another; a microcosmos in which the world is contained in a nutshell as a sign of what God intends to do for the whole creation; a new sort of polis in which heaven and earth come together. . . .¹²

This reminds me of a really fabulous documentary I saw about the people of the French village of LeChambon during your Second World War. In the midst of brutality, on the one hand, and the spirit of hatred and revenge, on the other, these simple rural people, under the informal leadership of Pastor André Trocmé, became a “conspiracy of goodness,” as the narrator said, rescuing and hiding thousands of Jews in their Christian homes. As Pastor Trocmé said in a church newsletter, alluding to my letter to the Ephesians, they would act only with “the weapons of the Spirit.”

You North American Christians speak a lot about being “spiritual,” but where are the Trocmés in your churches? Where are the churches of LeChambon? Your current political and cultural climate is one, quite frankly, not only of fear and death, but also of idolatry. You are enslaved to your various –isms: consumerism, racism, nationalism, ethnocentrism, exceptionalism, Americanism, postmodernism, militarism. What a beautiful thing it would be if you could catch God's vision of what the Spirit was up to in my day and is up to in yours: creating an international network of multicultural, socio-economically diverse communities joyfully acknowledging Jesus as Lord, truly worshipping God, and bearing witness in word and deed to God's work of new creation by conformity to his Son.

I rejoice that some of you (“you” plural) are trying to be and do this now, especially in the midst of the world's worst refugee crisis in a long time. It seems that in-Christ communities north of the border are doing a better job of cruciform hospitality than most of those south of the border, where some significant conversion of heart and will is needed. As the Macedonians in northern Greece were an

10 See, e.g., Richard B. Hays, *The Conversion of the Imagination: Paul as Interpreter of Israel's Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005).

11 This is N. T. Wright's summary of the character of the church according to Paul (*Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, vol. 4 of *Christian Origins and the Question of God* [Minneapolis: Fortress, 2013], 1492).

12 Ibid.

example to the Corinthians in southern Greece, perhaps northern assemblies could once again influence southerners. We live in hope.

A living exegesis of the Gospel

All of this leads to my third point about being in Christ. To be in Christ as an alternative community is *to be a living exegesis, or faithful interpretation, of the gospel*. It is *to become like Christ* and therefore, in a profound sense, it is *to become the gospel* by becoming a communal commentary on it. *That*, brothers and sisters, is fellowship—participation in God’s work. Allow me to quote the important missiologist Lesslie Newbigin:

I have come to feel that the primary reality of which we have to take account in seeking for a Christian impact on public life is the Christian congregation. How is it possible that the gospel should be credible, that people should come to believe that the power which has the last word in human affairs is represented by a man hanging on a cross? I am suggesting that the only answer, the only hermeneutic [means of interpretation] of the gospel, is a congregation of men and women who believe it and live by it.¹³

I have observed the North American church’s fascination with the cross of Jesus. I share this commitment to Christ crucified, as I said to the Corinthian church: “I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ; that is, Jesus Christ *crucified*” (1 Cor 2:2; MJG’s translation and emphasis). Of course this does not eliminate the resurrection, as I will stress shortly. But it does remind us, in the words of one of my interpreters from the last century, that the cross is the signature of the one who is risen (Ernst Käsemann).¹⁴ But I sense from your hymns and sermons, your books and tapes, that for you the cross is mostly about the cross as the *source* of your salvation. You are fond of arguing about which “model of the atonement” is correct. Well, of course the death of Jesus is the *source* of our salvation, but it is also the *shape* of our salvation. That’s what I mean when I said “work out,” or put into practice, your salvation.

So people of the resurrection will always be people of the cross. They will learn to wash feet, as my colleague John reported in his Gospel. I actually wrote a poem about that event, with a short introduction (Phil 2:5–11). I offer the translation of our mutual friend:

13 Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 27, in a chapter entitled “The Congregation as Hermeneutic of the Gospel.”

14 Ernst Käsemann, “The Saving Significance of the Death of Jesus,” in *Perspectives on Paul*, trans. Margaret Kohl (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971; reprint, Mifflintown, PA: Sigler, 1996), 56.

Cultivate this mindset — this way of thinking, acting, and feeling — in your community, which is in fact a community in the Messiah Jesus:

Although—and because—he was in the form of God,

He did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited for his own advantage,

but rather emptied himself by taking the form of a slave—that is, by being born as a human being.

And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross.

For this reason God superexalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name,

so that at the name of Jesus every knee will bend—

in heaven and on earth and under the earth—

and every tongue will acclaim, “Jesus the Messiah is Lord!” to the glory of God the Father.

I am quite pleased that some churches still sing this poem in your time and place. Our translator refers to it as my “master story,” and I basically approve of that characterization.¹⁵ It is a story of downward mobility, of renouncing power and prestige and status for the benefit of others, like Jesus’ footwashing:

And during supper Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God, got up from the table, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself. Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples’ feet and to wipe them with the towel that was tied around him. (John 13:2b–5)

Jesus interpreted this for his disciples:

After he had washed their feet, had put on his robe, and had returned to the table, he said to them, “Do you know what I have done to you? You call me Teacher and Lord—and you are right, for that is what I am. So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet. For I have set you

15 See especially Michael J. Gorman, *Cruciformity: Paul’s Narrative Spirituality of the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 88–92 and elsewhere in his work. For the translation of Phil 2:5–11 offered here, see Gorman, *Apostle of the Crucified Lord: A Theological Introduction to Paul and His Letters*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016), 125–28; ch. 13.

an example, that you also should do as I have done to you. Very truly, I tell you, servants are not greater than their master, nor are messengers greater than the one who sent them. (John 13:12–16)

Similarly, I interpreted my poem for the churches on several occasions. Here is the interpretation directly connected to the text of the poem in my letter to the Philippians:

If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. (Phil 2:1–4)

In our tradition, this has generally been called *imitatio Christi*, or the imitation of Christ. Others, including our translator of the poem, also call this “cruciformity,” or cross-shaped living. Some have insisted that this is not merely *imitation*; it is *participation*. I completely agree. It is about Christ being in us and about us being in Christ—individually and together.

You may notice that my poem tells a story. As a story of downward mobility, the first stanza is a story in three stages. It has sometimes been described as “although [x] not [y] but [z],” where [x] is status, [y] is selfish exploitation, and [z] is self-giving for others.¹⁶

So let me cut to the chase, brothers and sisters. Is this what your in-Christ community looks like? Is this how you decide your priorities? Your budget? Your mission activity? If you truly believe that Christ crucified is the power of God, and you want the power of God to be at work in and through your Christian community, you will seek to become a community shaped by my master story—which is really God’s master story. Now this may be the most important thing I say in this letter: You see, the crucified Jesus was a Christophany—revealing what the Messiah is like. But it is also a *theophany*—revealing what *God* is like. And it is also an *ecclesiophany*—revealing what the church is supposed to be like. And ultimately it is also an *anthrophany*—revealing what human beings are meant to be like.

It may appear from Philippians 2 and John 13 that this kind of servanthood is only for life within the community. But that is not what Jesus or John meant, nor I. If you read my letter and John’s Gospel carefully, you will see that this self-giving love is meant to be offered to all people. It is what defines you as a Christian

16 See Gorman, *Cruciformity*, 90–91 et passim, and elsewhere in his work.

community—and what may very well get you in trouble when you take it to the streets. Just read the first chapter of my letter to the Philippians, or the book of Acts, or what happens to the footwashing Jesus and his disciples. The church's inner and public life must match, just as the individual believer's private and public lives must match. That is why I told Philemon that the slave Onesimus, newly converted to Christ, was coming back to him “no longer as a slave but more than a slave, a beloved brother . . . both in the flesh and in the Lord” (Philemon 16). In the flesh means “out there in the world” and “in the Lord” means right here in the church.

To participate in the mission of God is to discern, in your particular context, what it means to embody the story of Jesus and thus to “become”—please put that in quotation marks—the gospel to and for all. “Become” not in the sense of replacing the gospel, as if you or I were the savior, but of bearing witness to it in a coherent individual and corporate life of word and deed. And “all” in the sense of the “all” of your world, as you experience it, whether near or far. I made it quite clear on several occasions that we are called to reach out to all, beyond our own churches, but not everyone reads my letters as carefully as they should. (I offer just two examples, from one of my earliest letters: (“increase and abound in love for one another and for all” [1 Thess 3:12]; “See that none of you repays evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to all” [1 Thess 5:15]).

The paradox in all of this is that life comes through death. The life of the world comes through the death of the Messiah, not least because God raised him from the dead. So too, life for the world comes through our cross-shaped existence, which is, paradoxically, being raised to newness of life. I know: it makes no sense at all. But it is true. I experienced it throughout my life, and I wrote about it numerous times, most extensively in my second canonical letter to the Corinthian believers. Of many lines I could quote, here are just a few:

We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies. For while we live, we are always being given up to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus may be made visible in our mortal flesh. So death is at work in us, but life in you. (2 Cor 4:8–12)

Becoming like God

I have just mentioned that the crucified Messiah is an ecclesiophany, revealing what the church is supposed to be like, and an anthropany, revealing what human beings are meant to be like. *My fourth point is that to be in Christ is to become*

what God is like because God in Christ became like us. I want to explain this a bit more fully by quoting again from my second letter to the Corinthians:

For the love of Christ urges us on, because we are convinced that one has died for all; therefore all have died. And he died for all, so that those who live might live no longer for themselves, but for him who died and was raised for them. From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way. So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; ¹⁹that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness [or justice] of God. (2 Cor 5:14–21)

This, by the way, is one of my favorite passages. Yes, I was specifically referring to my colleagues and me as Christ's ambassadors. But I was implying that all believers are ambassadors. Look at the last verse: all of us in Christ are becoming God's righteousness. What a powerful line about transformation! As my early theological successors like Irenaeus and Athanasius said, "He became what we are so that we could become what he is." More recently, one of my very favorite interpreters, Richard Hays, said this:

[Paul] does not say "that we might *know about* the righteousness of God," nor "that we might *believe in* the righteousness of God," nor even "that we might *receive* the righteousness of God." Instead, the church is to *become* the righteousness of God: where the church embodies in its life together the world-reconciling love of Jesus Christ, the new creation is manifest. The church incarnates the righteousness of God.¹⁷

I absolutely *love* it when an interpreter says something even better than I did!

What Richard and I are saying is this: God's mission is to "put the world to rights," as Tom Wright likes to say. The prophetic promises of God for a new

17 Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: Community, Cross, New Creation; A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996), 24.

creation are coming true. That means that God's righteousness—God's saving character and transformative activity that bring about God's kind of justice and *shalom*—is happening now, and we get to be part of it! Yes, it's about individuals being reconciled with God and being transformed into people who no longer live for themselves but for Christ. But it's about much more than that, too. It's about those individuals becoming the kind of community that faithfully represents the God who recreates, rectifies, and renews because God has the whole world in mind.

This has sometimes been referred to as “missional theosis.”¹⁸ Theosis, or deification (as it is also called), refers to the process of becoming like God by participating in the life of God. This is not a term known to everyone in your time and place, but it's a good one. The term's chief proponent even adds two more adjectives to the phrase and calls it “communal, cruciform, missional theosis.” It means that we become like God when we participate together in the cross-shaped mission and life of God, Father, Son, and Spirit.

Let's you think that either I or some ancient or contemporary Christian theologian invented this idea out of the blue, recall the scriptural mandate, “You shall be holy, for I am holy” (Lev 11:45; 19:2; 20:26). More specifically, with special relevance for your missional context, recall the words of Deuteronomy, one of my favorite books:

Although heaven and the heaven of heavens belong to the Lord your God, the earth with all that is in it, yet the Lord set his heart in love on your ancestors alone and chose you, their descendants after them, out of all the peoples, as it is today. Circumcise, then, the foreskin of your heart, and do not be stubborn any longer. For the Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who is not partial and takes no bribe,¹⁸ who executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and who loves the strangers, providing them food and clothing. You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt. (Deut 10:14–18)

The Lord loves you; the Lord loves the stranger; you too should love the stranger. Then you will be like God. That is missional theosis.

¹⁸ See, e.g., Michael J. Gorman, *Becoming the Gospel: Paul, Participation, and Mission* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015). For a more technical account, see his “Paul's Corporate, Cruciform, Missional Theosis in Second Corinthians,” in *'In Christ' in Paul: Explorations in Paul's Theology of Union and Participation*, ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer, Constantine R. Campbell, and Michael J. Thate, WUNT II/384; Mohr Siebeck, 2014), 181–208.

A Practical Word before the Conclusion

Before I conclude, I should offer a few practical words about implementing this vision. With the Spirit's help, it is not as difficult as it might appear.

First of all, work at caring for one another and unity in your own congregation. It will spill over to other contexts.

Second, as I told everyone, but especially the Corinthian believers, flee from sexual immorality and idolatry, including especially the false gods of Rights and Power. These are the fundamental sins of every culture I know, but especially yours, and they undermine your integrity as a missional contrast society. Absolute Rights and Absolute Power are absolutely idolatrous. Embrace virtue, and there you will find joy. Embrace weakness, and there you will find the power of God.

Third, as I also told the Corinthians, speak and live the gospel not only in your fellowship, but also with your unbelieving family members at home (1 Cor 7:10–16) and with your friends (1 Cor 10:23–11:1).

Finally, for now, as I (once again) also told the Corinthians, make your worship services truly missional. You are fighting about what kind of music, worship style, “messages,” and doughnuts or bagels will be most “appealing” to seekers. You are trying to make the gospel palatable. That strategy is demeaning both to our Lord and to those seekers. You have no business trying to make the gospel *palatable*, but you should, as I told the Corinthians (1 Cor 14), make it *intelligible*.

It should be clear that my emphasis in this letter on you-plural does not cancel out the importance of you-singular. As our African brothers and sisters say, “I am because we are”—but the “I” has not disappeared.

Conclusion

I lived in the time *before* Christendom in the Roman Empire. You now live in the time *after* Christendom in North America. So our contexts are remarkably similar despite all the differences. I therefore resonate with the words of Bryan Stone, who summarizes his book *Evangelism after Christendom* as follows:

[T]he most evangelistic thing the church can do today is to be the church—to be formed imaginatively by the Holy Spirit through core practices such as worship, forgiveness, hospitality, and economic sharing into a distinctive people in the world, a new social option, the body of Christ.¹⁹

My last words for you would be these, which I consider to be a commissioning prayer. I hope that it will inspire the conversion of your imagination as you—plural and singular—try to discern where and how God is calling you to be the church

19 Bryan P. Stone, *Evangelism after Christendom: The Theology and Practice of Christian Witness* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2006), 15.

more fully, and thereby to participate in the saving, healing mission of God in your part of the world.

For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name. I pray that, according to the riches of his glory, he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen. (Eph 3:14–21)